

BENNY ABANTE: THE JERRY FALWELL OF THE PHILIPPINES

February 4, 2004 (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article) -

On Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2004, I met with Benny Abante in Manila. He is a pastor and a leader of the Philippine Baptist Bible Fellowship.

This was my first trip to the Philippines, and my contact was Pastor Medel Barrera of the Berean Bible Baptist Church in Cavite, south of Manila. Pastor Medel has a brother in San Diego named Melito Barrera, and when I preached at Melito's church in January 2003 he told me that he would like to see me preach in the Philippines and asked if I would be willing to go. He told me about his brother Medel's church. I agreed, thinking that Medel would be my main host and would be arranging the meetings. Knowing that Brother Melito Barrera is likeminded, I did not look any further into the schedule until after I arrived in the country. As it turned out, it was not Pastor Medel Barrera who set up the meetings, but the schedule was put together largely by another Filipino pastor, and among others I was scheduled to preach at Benny Abante's church.

On Tuesday, Jan. 13, I was asked if I would meet the next day for lunch with Benny Abante and with his younger brother Reuben (who is also a pastor and a leader in the Philippines BBF), and I agreed.

We met at Burgeroo's restaurant in the Power Plant Mall in Manila. I told them a little of my background and why I am so concerned about the compromise that is happening among fundamental Baptist churches. I explained that I did not grow up in a fundamentalist church and that I did not begin to learn about such things until after I was saved in 1973 at age 23. I was studying the Bible diligently so I could know how to find a good church. Soon thereafter I joined an independent Baptist church, and one of the things that attracted me was Bible separation, both ecclesiastical as well as separation from the world. Not only did independent Baptists of that day believe the truth but they were willing to stand for it. That church was started by a small group of people who came out of the Southern Baptist Convention. They were separatists. I knew that was right, according to Romans 16:17; 2 Tim. 3:5; Jude 3; and many other passages. Thus I am a fundamentalist separatist by conviction, not merely by birth or education.

I explained further to the Abante brothers that since the early 1990s I have seen great changes occurring among fundamental Baptist churches, a downplaying of separation, a more positive emphasis in the preaching, more ecumenical activities, a dramatic increase in worldliness, the onslaught of contemporary music, etc. Fundamental Baptists are becoming like Southern Baptists, because they are giving up separation.

Benny Abante changed the subject by charging me with being unethical in my visit to churches in the Philippines. It soon became obvious that Abante had grilled the pastors for whom I had preached in an attempt to find something to use against me. By the time I met him, I had preached in six churches, and in one case I had told a pastor privately that I felt that his music was going in a contemporary direction. I warned him that his piano player was using soft rock styles. I am somewhat of an expert in this area, because of my experiences in living the rock & roll lifestyle for many years before I was saved and my extensive research into contemporary Christian music. In another Filipino church, after I finished preaching, the pastor asked me to come back up front and explain to the congregation how the

compromise comes into churches. This was Pastor Tan. In response, I stood back up and said that oftentimes it begins with the music. I quoted the late evangelist Gordon Sears who warned, "When the standard of music is lowered, then the standard of dress is also lowered. When the standard of dress is lowered, then the standard of conduct is also lowered. When the standard of conduct is lowered, then the sense of value in God's truth is lowered." I pointed to the electric guitars that this church uses and I warned that those guitars can easily be used to play contemporary music and that the music must be carefully guarded. I further warned that I felt they were already using them in a slightly contemporary fashion. Another situation that Abante brought up was a private conversation about evangelism that I had with a pastor. I asked the pastor how the church was doing and he told me that 23,000 had trusted Christ in the previous year. I asked him if he thought those people were actually saved. That is an average of more than 63 per day. (His church had about 400 in attendance the morning I preached there.) He readily admitted that it was probably a meaningless number as far as genuine salvation goes and he added that only 600 of them had been baptized.

Benny Abante repeatedly charged me with being ignorant and unethical because of these three incidents, because, according to him, I had no right to say anything about what was going on in the churches. I tried to explain my position, that in one case the pastor had asked me pointedly to tell the church how compromise comes, and the other two cases were private conversations with pastors. I explained that if there was anything unethical being done in the churches in the Philippines, it was not being done by me. I asked him how the truth could be "unethical"! Benny wouldn't listen but became very agitated and angry. At least twice he threatened to hit me with his fists. He warned me that he has a black belt in something or the other. I was amazed at the way I was being treated. At first he was berating me like a dog and told me to shut up and he would teach me something. Abante kept saying that I am unethical and educated beyond my intelligence and have no wisdom and such things. He said, "Do you know what an egg head is? It is someone like you who is educated beyond his intelligence." He told me that he was there to educate me properly. He told me that I must respect the Filipino culture and know that I am only a guest and that guests should not speak out and offend people. I tried to explain that I understand that and that I have lived in Asian countries for almost 14 years of my life and that I try to be cautious in such matters, but that does not mean that I will keep my mouth shut about things that are wrong in churches. He said, "Paul taught us when in Rome do as the Romans do." Even the pope probably knows the Bible better than that!

By the way, even though Benny Abante told me that I need to learn to respect the Filipino culture, he himself did not show the same respect toward me. At age 54 I am his elder, yet he rebuked me severely and treated me like a lowly servant. I know enough to know that this is not the Filipino way. It is also not the Bible way. "Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father..." (1 Timothy 5:1).

We talked about issues facing fundamentalism. Benny Abante told me that Jerry Falwell is his good and close friend, and I warned him that Dr. Falwell is the "Billy Graham of independent Baptists," because he is leading fundamental Baptist churches in the same path and philosophy. He is teaching them to be ecumenical, to join hands with Roman Catholics in organizations such as Promise Keepers, to use Christian rock music (such as the group dc Talk, which was formed by Liberty University students), to use any Bible translation, etc.

Benny Abante actually asked me what is wrong with Billy Graham. He argued that Graham preaches the gospel. I reminded Abante that it is not enough merely to preach the gospel; we must be faithful to God's Word. Billy Graham has done more than any other man alive to break down the walls of separation

between true Christians and false. He has turned thousands of his converts over to the Catholic Church and to modernistic Protestant churches. Graham has been doing this since the 1950s and we have documented it extensively in our book *Evangelicals and Rome*. This is a very wicked thing. Does God allow a shepherd to turn the sheep over to wolves? Does God overlook that as long as the man is “preaching the gospel”?

Benny Abante told me that he is running for political office and that he intends to keep his job as pastor even if he wins. Jerry Falwell began his spiritual downfall through political involvement in the 1980s. He founded the Moral Majority and thus yoked together with every other type of “Christian” for the sake of having a moral and political influence. It was the first step of compromise that has led him down a spiritual slide farther and farther away from his roots as a fundamental Baptist and from the Word of God. We do not see this type of thing in the Scriptures. The apostles did not try to “bring the Roman Empire back to God.” They did not form ecumenical alliances for the sake of influencing Caesar. They gave themselves completely to preaching the gospel and church planting and discipling believers with the Word of God. When they chose the first deacons, the apostles said, “We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). They had no time for the dirty business of worldly politics. The believer’s only responsibility to the secular government is to obey and honor it (Rom. 13) and to pray for it (1 Tim. 2). The New Testament says nothing else about it. The Lord gave us His Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), and it has nothing whatsoever to do with politics.

Not long into the conversation with the Abante brothers, I told them that it would be best if I did not come to preach in their churches. It was very obvious that we are not walking in the same direction. “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

As he described his philosophy to me I realized that Benny Abante’s philosophy is contrary to the Word of God, that he is a pragmatist who justifies whatever he does, and that he is a dangerous man to follow.

After I got home from the meeting with the Abante brothers, I looked into my computer files for information about the Philippines. I thought the name Abante sounded familiar, and I was right. Last year Benny Abante was a speaker at the Jesus Saves Crusade in Manila, which featured evangelist Dave Janney. The final speaker of the crusade was Philippines president Gloria Arroyo, a Roman Catholic! She tried to use biblical words, but she does not understand what they mean. The attendees were given coupons for free groceries and goods. Dave Janney’s web site promotes the contemporary music group FFH. The group’s album “Ready to Fly” is described as “upbeat pop melodies over an acoustic, guitar-driven rhythm.” Using “quick prayerism” methodology, the crusade organizers claimed that 50,000 Filipinos got saved in one evening! Billy Graham himself could not have done a better job at compromise and confusion.

I thank the Lord for my trip to the Philippines. I am told that there are 3,500 independent Baptist churches in these islands and that new ones are being started at the rate of three per week. They are beginning to send out missionaries to other lands. In the last 10 years, at least 40 missionaries have been sent out and supported by the Filipino churches, not counting the hundreds of Filipino missionaries who are starting new churches in their homeland.

My host, Pastor Medel Barrera, was most gracious and is a likeminded man of God. I count it a privilege to know him. I preached in 10 churches and in most of the meetings pastors were in attendance from other congregations. Thus I had the privilege of preaching to about 250 pastors and church planters. I met

many humble men of God who are minding their own business and are doing a faithful work for their Lord and who are trusting Him to meet their needs, men who want to stay in the “old paths” and who are open to my warnings about the contemporary direction.

I warned the preachers in the Philippines that there are many dangers facing fundamental Baptist churches today. New winds are blowing, new philosophies are catching on, new directions are being pursued. Men like Jerry Falwell and Benny Abante are leading the way in these matters, and those who follow them will go astray.

“Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way” (Psalm 119:128).

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